

DOULA MOURIKI

THE FRESCOS
OF THE CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS
AT PLATSA IN THE MANI

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INTRODUCTION

The number of Byzantine churches scattered across the Greek countryside never fails to astonish people anxious to acquaint themselves with the monuments of mediaeval civilization in Greece. Some of these churches are distinguished by the extraordinary simplicity of their exterior aspect and interior decoration, others reflect the proud ambitions of founders enjoying a high social and economic standard of living. As works of art endowed with specific merits, the churches are often admired on purely aesthetic grounds; more often than not too, they are inextricably bound up with sentiment, for they are closely linked with the religious faith of the people and their cultural heritage.

A unique experience awaits the visitor to the Mani, one of the strangest parts of Greece. Besides the beauty and unsport character of the countryside, despite the rebellious nature of the inhabitants who are, somewhat incongruously, stubbornly attached to tradition, countless Byzantine churches still survive on its plateaux and in its valleys. A few churches of the Middle Byzantine period in particular, ranging from the 10th to the 13th centuries have attracted the attention of scholars. But the churches of the last period of Byzantine history, when the state was ruled by the Palaeologue dynasty, are less well known. Most of the frescoes in the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari, situated near the village of Platsa in the Western Mani, can in fact be ascribed, by means of epigraphical and stylistic evidence, to about the mid-14th century.

A study of the churches of Mani, about which we know much more than we used to – largely due to the research carried out by Nicholas Drandakis – is full of promise, because the number of churches, taken in chronological sequence, is in fact very considerable. For the time being, however, it is difficult to draw any general conclusions regarding the art of this area. Conclusions of this kind would necessarily have to be based on the publication of the monuments of the Mani, together with the acquisition of the widest possible knowledge of the totality of mediaeval monuments in Greece, many of which continue, to a large extent, to be inaccessible to scholars.

Further reasons contribute to the difficulty of undertaking a thorough examination of the painted decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari. In the first place, the frescoes have not yet been cleaned. Subsequent architectural alterations, the overlaying of the frescoes on the lower parts of the walls with whitewash, the completion of the painted decoration at a later period than the original work, as well as the repainting of some sections, all combine to prevent us from obtaining a complete picture of the original decoration of the church. It must also be stressed that

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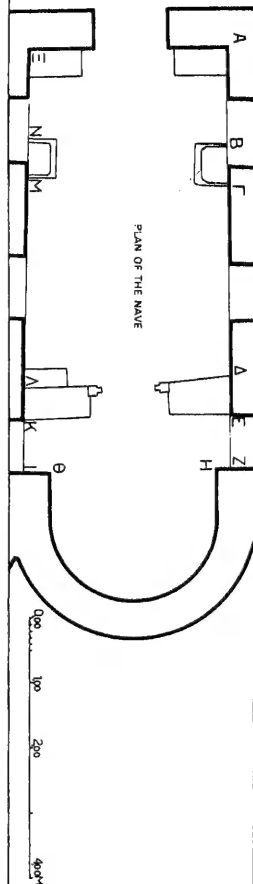
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PLAN OF THE NAVE



The dedicatory inscription of Constantine Spanis in the nave of St. Nicholas.
(Transcription by the architect M. Korres.)

since no comparative material has been published on many of the frescoes in the church, especially by those of the later period, we are not in a position to relate them to the art of the period.

The present study is consequently devoted mainly to the earlier frescoes which are associated with the renovation of the church by Constantine Spanis, a well-known contemporary personality in this area. Thanks to their aesthetic merits and to the fact that references to their date are preserved, these frescoes considerably increase our knowledge of the development of Byzantine painting in about the mid-14th century, a period from which few dated monuments have survived. Furthermore, these frescoes provide valuable evidence of the history of this area during the last period of the existence of the Byzantine state. In order that the reader may acquire a better understanding of the paintings in the Church of St. Nicholas it might be useful to begin this study with an introductory chapter on the personality of the renovator, followed by two others on the architecture and sculptural decoration of the church.

1. THE RENOVATOR OF THE CHURCH

The conditions under which the frescoes of St. Nicholas at Cambiari were painted are known from four inscriptions preserved in different parts of the church¹. The most important evidence is provided by a metrical inscription painted in majuscules across an horizontal band in the nave.

The inscription begins on the north wall, near the main entrance of the west side, at a height of about 2.60 m. from the floor, continues into the sanctuary, runs across the south wall in the west section of which it ends exactly opposite the point where it began. As a result of repairs carried out at a later period there are four gaps in the inscription. It was first read by Socrates Kouygas, who also furnished a commentary on its historical interpretation². Apart from some reservations in regard to the missing words, the inscription may be read as follows:

† Τὸν δ' ἐβροῖν ναὶν, ἀγνοούμενον τὴν οὖν
ὅν ὁ φ. ας γρόν(α) C.
Τούτων ἀνεκάλισεν, ὁ πανευγενέστατος(ς)
πανέβλατος τέταρτος(ς), δρόγγου Μελιγγῶν,
Κωνσταντῖνος Ιος, ὁ Στανῆς,
διὰ συμβίας τέταρτος(ς) Μαρίας,
Μωσῆ θεότῃ, προσκαταγραφούμην,
τῇ ἀγνέκῃ, Βεαλέτῃ πανόφωτος,
εἰς κτίσεως ἐνέειν, οἰκονομείαν,
τῆς οἱς λογίας, ἱερέα Παροχότρον,
Ἐγὼ δὲ τούτων τ(ὸν) ναὶν παντεπὶ τῇ
. Σ γὰρ δόξης, ἀφ' οὗς κτισά(ται)
οὐκ ἐνδέετ' ἄλλῃ τῶν ἐμῶν ποιημάτων,
οὐ δ' ἀντιδῶνς μοι λόγον σφαλιμάτων,
Σκι ἀκινυμάτων, Ἐξ(ου)ς Ἰῶ Ἰὼκτιανῶς

The inscription is not distinguished for accurate syntax or orthography. It is impossible to provide a complete reproduction of its contents owing to the gaps, although some information can be obtained from it. The saint to which this church was dedicated remains unknown. The church itself was probably built, two hundred years before its renovation, by some person whose name must have been referred to in one of the obliterated sections. It was renovated by the "most noble" and "most revered" Constantine Spanis, who held the office of *isouasis* of the *drongos* of the Melings (i.e. military governor of the mountainous region of Taygetus), and by his wife Maria, the *isouaina*. Constantine Spanis himself reckons that the Tabernacle raised by the architect Bessalel, which Moses, who had beheld God, had seen in a vision, prefigured the Nativity of Christ and, consequently, the redemption of mankind. Emboldened to compare himself, in some kind of way, to these two biblical figures, Spanis undertook the renovation of the church at Cambiari and dedicated it to Christ. Although aware that numerous edifices had been dedicated to the glory of the Pantocrator, he was not discouraged from pursuing his task. As a reward for his offering to Christ, he begged forgiveness of his sins. The date 6846 from the creation of the world and the indiction (the number 6 – for the 6th indiction³ – was discernible a few years ago) indicate that the renovation of St. Nicholas was carried out between 1st September 1337 and 31st August 1338.

The donor played an important part in the history of the region, and it is not impossible to furnish a prosopography of him from contemporary sources. Constantine Spanis was a member of a powerful Meling family (of the well-known Slav tribe dwelling on Mt. Taygetus). As one may deduce from the much debated passage in the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus⁴, the Melings, together with another Slav tribe, the Exerites, had settled on the precipitous slopes of Mt. Taygetus as far back as the 9th century. Henceforward the Melings, who had clearly made their presence felt locally, are frequently referred to in the historical sources⁵. Relations between them and the Byzantine government are characterised by extreme tension, because at first this turbulent Slav tribe had no desire to recognise the authority of Byzantium or to pay the usual taxes exacted in other provinces of the Empire⁶. In order to deal with this situation the state appointed a special governor in the 10th century to administer that part of the Taygetus region which was inhabited by the Melings⁷. During the Palaeologue period the Melings provided the state with valuable services by fighting the Franks. The most important source for the history of the Franks in the Peloponnese, the *Chronicle of the Morea*, contains numerous references to the Melings⁸, from which we learn that they were granted titles and privileges by the Byzantine state⁹. During the early part of the Turkish occupation the Melings, together with other Slavs dwelling in the Peloponnese, were assimilated into the Greek population. The last reference to the Slavs of the Peloponnese appears to have been made by Laonikos Chalkokondyles¹⁰.

According to the sources, which are varied and range chronologically from the second half of the 13th to the first half of the 15th century¹¹, the reputation of the family of the donor of the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambiari stood highest among the community of the Melings. The earliest reference to a member of the family exists in a document dated 1278 in the Venetian archives; in it mention is made of a certain Michail Spano, *Capitaneum in Arvanitia* (the modern Kardanvili), who is described as stealing a quantity of cereals from a Venetian in Corone¹². The French variant of the *Chronicle of the Morea* contains a reference to the fact that in 1296 Prince

Pleural de Hamaul entered into an agreement with "Spany, un puissant homme des Esclavons, qui estoit sire de la Gisterne et des autres chateaux entour" to capture the castle of St. George situated in the Kalamata area and occupied by the Byzantines¹⁵.

Constantine Spanis' name is referred to in three sources. Besides the epigraphical evidence in the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari, another inscription still exists in the small church of St. George of the Stephanopoli at Oitylo, a few kilometres south of Patras. The inscription is carved on a marble plaque which serves as an horizontal support for the relieving arch above the south entrance door of the church. As a result of later restoration work carried out in the church¹⁶ the plaque is now placed upside down. The meaning of the inscription is not altogether clear. According to a recent reading *in situ*, the Church of St. George was erected and renovated by Constantine Spanis, during the reign of the Emperor Andronicus III, son of Michael Palaeologus IX, and at a time when office was held by the "most venerable and revered *isauusis* of the Melings Kyr Constantine Spanis", by Kyr Lartagas Slavovits and a certain Anna. The manner in which the inscription is formulated permits one to surmise that Spanis probably played some part in the construction and restoration of the church. Even so, the importance attached to the renovation of the Church of St. George cannot be compared with that of St. Nicholas. The former is a small single-chamber edifice with a barrel vaulted roof; the exterior is now entirely whitewashed; the interior possesses some frescoes of a much later date¹⁷.

A last reference to Constantine Spanis is made in a Turkish chronicle in verse, the *Destan of Umrir Paşa*, composed by a Turkish chronicler, Enveri, of the 15th century¹⁸. The work deals mainly with the dynamic personality of Umrir, Emir of Aidin, who, during the course of his first years in power, constituted the most serious of all threats to the Peloponnese¹⁹. Possessing the largest fleet in the Aegean, the Emir appeared for the first time in the Peloponnese in 1332 or 1333. In the spring of 1335 he undertook a second campaign in the Peloponnese, the chief aim of which appears to have been the capture of Monemvasia. The Emir landed near the town, and the inhabitants hastened to offer to pay ransom in the hope of ensuring the withdrawal of the Turks. According to the contents of the Turkish epic poem, Umrir then rounded Capes Malea and Taenarum and appeared in the Messenian Gulf. The country here was ruled by Ispen, who, at the head of a large army, tried to prevent the landing of the Turks. From the same source it may be deduced that the resistance of the local ruler proved fruitless. The Turks captured two localities, put the warriors to death and carried off the women and children into slavery¹⁸.

Historians are in agreement that the Ispen of the Turkish epic is none other than Constantine Spanis¹⁹. The dedicatory inscription in the Church of St. George at Oitylo furnishes evidence that Spanis already had the right to be called *αἰεταρχος* (*isauis* or *isauusis* of the Melings). The titles *παυενοταρχος* ("most noble") and *παυεβταρχος* ("most revered") which Spanis claimed for himself in the inscription at the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari were attached to a specific office: that of "isauusis of the drongos of the Melings". The title, in both instances, refers to Spanis' office and specific political and military functions²⁰.

The phraseology of the impressive dedicatory inscription at Cambinari is suggestive of the pride felt by Spanis. The comparison between the renovator of the Church of St. Nicholas and Moses and Besaleel, the biblical architect, is certainly a common feature in Byzantine sources, first observed in the Early Christian period²¹. It is worth noting that a similar high-flown content of this

kind should be found in an inscription in a church situated in such a remote province of the Byzantine state as the Mani.

We see that Constantine Spanis thus possesses all the characteristics of a Byzantine official of the Paleologue period who divides his time between military operations and the performance of acts of piety, such as the renovation of the church in the Mani. Both activities were considered means of enhancing the prestige of provincial authorities, who felt more self-assured than ever before for the very reason that their ties with the seat of the central government had been loosened. The inscription in the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari serves the same purpose as the portraits of the donors which often formed part of the painted decoration of churches of that period. It must also be stressed that this inscription has acquired a prominence which is unusual in a small provincial church. In such cases the dedicatory inscriptions are often placed either above the west entrance or in the Sanctuary. On the other hand, the impressive inscription running across the walls at St. Nicholas at Cambinari recalls similar inscriptions on the cornices in some Constantinopolitan churches, as in the Funerary Chapel of the Pammakaristos (Fethiye Djami).

Some of the epigraphical evidence preserved in the Church of St. Nicholas indicates that Constantine Spanis did not actually succeed in fulfilling all the aims he had in mind when he undertook the renovation of the church, especially as regards the painted decoration. The most important of the later inscriptions is placed above the west entrance of the south aisle. A complete reading is rendered impossible by the deterioration it has undergone in some of the sections which have, furthermore, been covered with whitewash. The inscription runs as follows²²:

- 1 *Ιηλ ὑπογραφήν ὁ πάτριος οὐτός κ(αί)*
- 2 *θεός υἱός τοῦ ἐν δόξῃσι π(ατ)ρ(ό)ς ἡμῶν Νικολάου*
- 3 *ἐπονομάζοντος κ(αί) ἀπ(α)ρχ(α)ν δ-*
- 4 *π(ατ)ρ(ό)ς κ(αί) ἀνταρχ(α)ν ἐπέδος τὸ ὑπερτίμον κ(αί)*
- 5 *οὐδ' οὐκ ἀκατάβητος εἰς ἀγίων κ(αί) ἀπεσεν τῶν ἐαυτῶν*
- 6 *οὐλ [Σ]καρπίνης κ(αί) τῶν ἀνδρῶν τῆς πόλεως*
- 7 *(ἐτους) ἡμερῶν*
- 8 *... ἡμερῶν μοναχοῦ*

Another inscription in the apse of the south aisle runs:

+ *Μνήστην Κ(υ)ρ(ε) τοῦ δούλου τοῦ Θε(ο)ῦ ἀνταρχ(α)ν τοῦ*
Σκαρπίνου καὶ Θεοδώρου τοῦ ἡ, Μνήστην Κ(υ)ρ(ε) τοῦ
δούλου τοῦ Θε(ο)ῦ Μηνανῆ ἐπέδος τοῦ ἡμεροῦλου καὶ

The two inscriptions in the south aisle suggest that the decoration was executed over a relatively long period of time, the date of the one in the sanctuary being 1343-1344, that of the one above the west entrance 1348-1349. Owing to the withdrawal of substantial financial aid by Constantine Spanis, the completion of the painted decoration of the south aisle was evidently postponed until further contributions were made by other local residents. As elsewhere, when churches were founded and artists commissioned to decorate them, priests and monks, not to mention lay inhabitants, acted as patrons. A lay personage, Demetrios Skarziotis, is specifically mentioned in the two inscriptions in the south aisle of the Church of St. Nicholas. An examination of the frescoes will eventually reveal the uneven quality of the painted decoration of the south aisle. For the moment, however, it should be borne in mind that this aisle was dedicated to St. Nicholas as deduced from: a) the evidence of the dedicatory inscription above the west entrance of the aisle which refers to this compartment as the Church of St. Nicholas; b) the depiction of the Saint's portrait in the conch; c) the inclusion of an extensive cycle of scenes from the life of St. Nicholas. The church, however, was originally dedicated by Constantine Spanis, as indicated in the large inscription in the nave, to Christ. Later the entire church came to be known as that of St. Nicholas – as it is to this day.

A small section of an inscription is just discernible in the apse of the north aisle at a point exactly parallel to the inscription in the sanctuary of the south aisle. This suggests that here too the decoration of the walls was financed by contributions from various donors. Only the words *ἐπεὶ τοῦ ἑσπέρου κ(αὶ) τῆς(ν) αὐτοῦ* are preserved. The date which must have followed the names of the donors is not discernible.

All these factors indicate that Constantine Spanis did not succeed in completing the painted decoration. Only fresh evidence might prove that either Spanis' death or his fall from office were the cause of the suspension of the works destined to renovate the church.

One further allusion to the Spanis family exists in the sources. From an *argyroul* dated March 1440 and ascribed to one of the Despots of Mistra – either Constantine or Theodore II – we learn that the privilege of having an individual by the name of Theodore Combis placed "at their disposal" was conferred on the brothers Nicholas and Theodore Ispanos. The Despot's grant of this favour derived from an old privilege based on the fact that the father of Theodore Combis had already been in the service of the Spanis family.²⁴ The value of the reference lies in the evidence it provides of the maintenance of friendly relations between the Despots of Mistra and the Spanis family. This relationship may probably account for certain iconographical and stylistic features in the painted decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari.

2. ARCHITECTURE

The sturdy mass of the Church of St. Nicholas dominates a plateau near the village of Platasa, to the right of the road leading to the southern part of the Western Mani. The site, commanding a

very fine view, is called Cambinari, a place name which obviously derives from the word *kámbos* (cambos; plain) and is often encountered in the Mani.²⁵

The present form of the church is that of a domed three-aisled basilica without a narthex.²⁶ The fact that the narthex did form part of the original edifice cannot, however, be disputed, because the north and south walls, which are composed of similar masonry, are carried beyond the west side, where the springing of a barrel vault is still preserved.

The length, width and height of the church are 9.70 m., 10.47 m. and 8.22 m. respectively. On the east side the three aisles terminate in three semi-circular apses, the volumes of which create an imposing effect; each apse extends along the entire width of the corresponding aisle. The width of the central aisle is 3.10 m., that of the north 2.45 m., of the south 2.42 m.

The three aisles are covered with barrel vaults without windows. The pointed roof of the central vault is slightly higher than those of the side ones which are slanting. The dome, which has undergone alterations in the course of recent repair-work, rises above the vault of the nave. Judging from an old photograph²⁷, one may describe the dome as a variation of the so-called Athenian one: that is to say, an octagon, whose sides are crowned by curved cornices. Originally there were four windows at the axial points and four conches at the diagonal axes; the four windows and three of the conches are now blocked. The dome, as we shall see, is not contemporary with the construction of the church. Another interesting architectural feature – also a later addition – is the bellcote crowning the entrance to the south aisle and consisting of two rectangular supports which form a single-lobe aperture.²⁸

The church has three entrances on the west front, each of which corresponds to the three aisles. It is clear that the original form of the central door has been altered; as a result of its height being raised at a later date, it cuts short the springing of the vault. The exterior aspect of the church is heavy and plain. The masonry consists of carved blocks of a greyish-brown colour joined in accordance with an irregular rectangular system; these come from the neighbouring quarry situated north-east of the church. From a certain height upwards the masonry, particularly that of the north and south walls, has undergone considerable repairs. Stones are mixed with bricks and roughly put together; especially in the north wall. It is moreover evident that the barrel vault of the north aisle must have once collapsed and been replaced by another. The sober and austere effect created by the exterior is not only due to the absence of windows but also to the paucity of brickwork decoration which is usually a characteristic feature of Byzantine churches from the 11th century onwards. The sole decorative feature is a spring course which crowns the three conches and the triangular pediment of the east side. In an old photograph of the church we see that another spring course ran below the cornice of the dome. It is, nevertheless, clear that this decorative feature did not form part of the original edifice.

The impression of heaviness created by the exterior of the church is also evident in the interior. The three aisles are separated from each other by thick walls, each of which has three low narrow openings serving as passages of communication with the side aisles. The space is thus completely broken up into three independent units. The various transformations which the church has undergone add to the impression of heaviness. The two side openings of the screen of the nave have been blocked, and a thick wall has been raised above it in order, apparently, to support the dome. This wall has a square opening above the Holy Door which serves to relieve the weight of the

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PLAN OF THE NAVE

Μ Ν

The dedicatory inscription of Constantine Spanis in the nave of St. Nicholas.
(Transcription by the architect M. Korres.)

since no comparative material has been published on many of the frescoes in the church, especially by those of the later period, we are not in a position to relate them to the art of the period.

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 δι' δ' φ..... ας χρόνῳ) C.
 Τοῦτον ἀνεκαίνατο, δ' πανευχέστατος(ς)
 πανέβλατος τίτατος(ς), δούρου Μεληγιῶν,
 Κωνσταντῖνος ... λογ, δ' Ἐπαφῆς,
 ἀπὸ οὐμβλας τίτατος(ς) Μελίος,
 Μωσῆ θεότῃ, προοικιστοῦμένη,
 ἡν ἀγρέκτον, Βεσέλην, πανόφως,
 εἰς κτίσας ἔκτεν, οἰκονομείαν,
 τῆς οἱς λογίας, ἱερῶσι Παροδοτῶν.
 Ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦτον τ(ὸν) ναὸν, πανεπὶ(τῃ)
ς γὰρ δόξης, δόξης, κτιστῶν(ων)
 οὐκ ἐνδεᾶ καὶ τὸν ἐμὸν νομῶν(ων),
 οὐ δ' ἀντιδῶν μοι ἄκαν σφάλλων.
 Ἐκί..... οκινῶν(ων), Ἐτ(ὸν) Ρῖο Μῆ ἰνδκτιῶν(ων)

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The inscription is not distinguished for accurate syntax or orthography. It is impossible to provide a complete reproduction of its contents owing to the gaps, although some information can be obtained from it. The saint to which this church was dedicated remains unknown. The church itself was probably built, two hundred years before its renovation, by some person whose name must have been referred to in one of the obliterated sections. It was renovated by the "most noble" and "most revered" Constantine Spanis, who held the office of *isauasts* of the *drongos* of the Melings (i.e. military governor of the mountainous region of Taygetus), and by his wife Maria, the *isauisina*. Constantine Spanis himself reckons that the Tabernacle raised by the architect Bealeel, which Moses, who had beheld God, had seen in a vision, prefigured the Nativity of Christ and, consequently, the redemption of mankind. Emboldened to compare himself, in some kind of way, to these two biblical figures, Spanis undertook the renovation of the church at Cambinari and dedicated it to Christ. Although aware that numerous edifices had been dedicated to the glory of the Pantocrator, he was not discouraged from pursuing his task. As a reward for his offering to Christ, he begged forgiveness of his sins. The date 6846 from the creation of the world and the indiction (the number 6 – for the 6th indiction³ – was discernible a few years ago) indicate that the renovation of St. Nicholas was carried out between 1st September 1337 and 31st August 1338.

The donor played an important part in the history of the region, and it is not impossible to furnish a prosopography of him from contemporary sources. Constantine Spanis was a member of a powerful Meling family (of the well-known Slav tribe dwelling on Mt. Taygetus). As one may deduce from the much debated passage in the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus⁴, the Melings, together with another Slav tribe, the Ezerites, had settled on the precipitous slopes of Mt. Taygetus as far back as the 9th century. Henceforward the Melings, who had clearly made their presence felt locally, are frequently referred to in the historical sources⁵. Relations between them and the Byzantine government are characterised by extreme tension, because at first this turbulent Slav tribe had no desire to recognise the authority of Byzantium or to pay the usual taxes exacted in other provinces of the Empire⁶. In order to deal with this situation the state appointed a special governor in the 10th century to administer that part of the Taygetus region which was inhabited by the Melings⁷. During the Palaeologue period the Melings provided the state with valuable services by fighting the Franks. The most important source for the history of the Franks⁸, from the Peloponneses, the *Chronicle of the Morea*, contains numerous references to the Melings⁹, from which we learn that they were granted titles and privileges by the Byzantine state¹⁰. During the early part of the Turkish occupation the Melings, together with other Slavs dwelling in the Peloponneses, were assimilated into the Greek population. The last reference to the Slavs of the Peloponneses appears to have been made by Laonikos Chalkokondyles¹¹.

According to the sources, which are varied and range chronologically from the second half of the 13th to the first half of the 15th century¹², the reputation of the family of the donor of the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari stood highest among the community of the Melings. The earliest reference to a member of the family exists in a document dated 1278 in the Venetian archives; in it mention is made of a certain Michail Spano, *Captaneum in Arduvizia* (the modern Kardamyli), who is described as stealing a quantity of cereals from a Venetian in Corone¹³. The French variant of the *Chronicle of the Morea* contains a reference to the fact that in 1296 Prince

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Flavien de Hamaui entered into an agreement with "Spani, un petit homme des Esclavons, qui estoit sire de la Gisterne et des autres chastiaux entour" to capture the castle of St. George situated in the Kalamata area and occupied by the Byzantines¹³.

Constantine Spanis' name is referred to in three sources. Besides the epigraphical evidence in the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari, another inscription still exists in the small church of St. George of the Stephanopoli at Oitylo, a few kilometres south of Patara. The inscription is carved on a marble plaque which serves as an horizontal support for the relieving arch above the south entrance door of the church. As a result of later restoration work carried out in the church¹⁴ the plaque is now placed upside down. The meaning of the inscription is not altogether clear. According to a recent reading *in situ*, the Church of St. George was erected and renovated in 1331-1332, during the reign of the Emperor Andronicus III, son of Michael Paleologus IX, and at a time when office was held by the "most venerable and revered *isauasis* of the Melings Kyr Constantine Spanis", by Kyr Larinas Selavuris and a certain Anna. The manner in which the inscription is formulated permits one to surmise that Spanis probably played some part in the construction and restoration of the church. Even so, the importance attached to the renovation of the Church of St. George cannot be compared with that of St. Nicholas. The former is a small single-chamber edifice with a barrel vaulted roof; the exterior is now entirely whitewashed; the interior possesses some frescoes of a much later date¹⁵.

A last reference to Constantine Spanis is made in a Turkish chronicle in verse, the *Destan of Umrut Pacha*, composed by a Turkish chronicler, Enveri, of the 15th century¹⁶. The work deals mainly with the dynamic personality of Umrut, Emir of Aidin, who, during the course of his first years in power, constituted the most serious of all threats to the Peloponnese¹⁷. Possessing the largest fleet in the Aegean, the Emir appeared for the first time in the Peloponnese in 1332 or 1333. In the spring of 1335 he undertook a second campaign in the Peloponnese, the chief aim of which appears to have been the capture of Monemvasia. The Emir landed near the town, and the inhabitants hastened to offer to pay ransom in the hope of ensuring the withdrawal of the Turks. According to the contents of the Turkish epic poem, Umrut then rounded Capes Malea and Tenarum and appeared in the Messenian Gulf. The country here was ruled by Ispen, who, at the head of a large army, tried to prevent the landing of the Turks. From the same source it may be deduced that the resistance of the local ruler proved fruitless. The Turks captured two localities, put the warriors to death and carried off the women and children into slavery¹⁸.

Historians are in agreement that the Ispen of the Turkish epic is none other than Constantine Spanis¹⁹. The dedicatory inscription in the Church of St. George at Oitylo furnishes evidence that Spanis already had the right to be called *sebastos* (*sebastis* or *isauasis* of the Melings). The titles *παυ-ευνεστρατος* ("most noble") and *πρωεβαστος* ("most revered") which Spanis claimed for himself in the inscription at the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari were attached to a specific office: that of "isauasis of the drongos of the Melings". The title, in both instances, refers to Spanis' office and specific political and military functions²⁰.

The phraseology of the impressive dedicatory inscription at Cambinari is suggestive of the pride felt by Spanis. The comparison between the renovator of the Church of St. Nicholas and Moses and Beselel, the biblical architect, is certainly a common feature in Byzantine sources, first observed in the Early Christian period²¹. It is worth noting that a similar high-flown content of this

kind should be found in an inscription in a church situated in such a remote province of the Byzantine state as the Manti.

We see that Constantine Spanis thus possesses all the characteristics of a Byzantine official of the Paleologue period who divides his time between military operations and the performance of acts of piety, such as the renovation of the church in the Manti. Both activities were considered means of enhancing the prestige of provincial authorities, who felt more self-assured than ever before for the very reason that their ties with the seat of the central government had been loosened. The inscription in the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambinari serves the same purpose as the portraits of the donors which often formed part of the painted decoration of churches of that period. It must also be stressed that this inscription has acquired a prominence which is unusual in a small provincial church. In such cases the dedicatory inscriptions are often placed either above the west entrance or in the Sanctuary. On the other hand, the impressive inscription running across the walls at St. Nicholas at Cambinari recalls similar inscriptions on the cornices in some Constantinopolitan churches, as in the Funerary Chapel of the Pamakaristos (Fethiye Djami).

Some of the epigraphical evidence preserved in the Church of St. Nicholas indicates that Constantine Spanis did not actually succeed in fulfilling all the aims he had in mind when he undertook the renovation of the church, especially as regards the painted decoration. The most important of the later inscriptions is placed above the west entrance of the south aisle. A complete reading is rendered impossible by the deterioration it has undergone in some of the sections which have, furthermore, been covered with whitewash. The inscription runs as follows²²:

- 1 *ἰαὶ ἡτοροφότη θ πάτερρος οἰτός κ(αί)*
- 2 *θεός, ναός τοῦ ἐν δ'ιόνος π(α)ρ(ο)ῦς ἡμῶν Νικολάου*
- 3 *τοῦ ἐν Μελίονος· διὰ συνεργίας κ(αί) κόντος Παταρίου*
- 4 *τερονούχου κ(αί) δι' ἡλ(α)νθ·*
- 5 *πύτρου· κ(αί) ἀνυργίου τέρπος τὸ ὑπερήμου κ(αί)*
- 6 *Νικολάου ἱερέως τ·*
- 7 *οἷς σκαλαῖς εἰς ἄγρων κ(αί) ἀρεσῶν τῶν ἐαυτῶν*
- 8 *ἀναστῶν καὶ ἀν(α)ργί·*
- 9 *οὐ / Σ(κα)ρ(α)νήτην κ(αί) τῶν ἁμῶν τῆς χ(α)ρ(α)ς*
- 10 *(ἐ)ρους ἡμῶν*
- 11 *... ἡμῶν μοναχῶν*

Another inscription in the apse of the south aisle runs:

- 1 *Μνήστη Κ(αί)π(α)ρ τοῦ δοῦλου τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ ἀνυργίου τοῦ*
- 2 *Σκαρ(α)νήτου καὶ Θεοδόρου τοῦ ἡ Μνήστη Κ(αί)π(α)ρ τοῦ*
- 3 *δοῦλου τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ Μνηστῆ ἱερέως τοῦ ἡκονόμου καὶ*

A small section of an inscription is just discernible in the apse of the north aisle at a point exactly parallel to the inscription in the sanctuary of the south aisle. This suggests that here too the decoration of the walls was financed by contributions from various donors. Only the words $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\gamma\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\kappa\alpha\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \nu\ \dots\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\iota$ are preserved. The date which must have followed the names of the donors is not discernible.

One further allusion to the Spanis family exists in the sources. From an argyrol dated March 1440 and ascribed to one of the Despots of Mistra – either Constantine or Theodore II – we learn that the privilege of having an individual by the name of Theodore Combis placed “at their disposal” was conferred on the brothers Nicholas and Theodore Spanos. The Despot’s grant of this favour derived from an old privilege based on the fact that the father of Theodore Combis had already been in the service of the Spanis family²⁴. The value of the reference lies in the evidence it provides of the maintenance of friendly relations between the Despots of Mistra and the Spanis family. This relationship may probably account for certain iconographical and stylistic features in the painted decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas at Cambrian.

2. ARCHITECTURE

26 The sturdy mass of the Church of St. Nicholas dominates a plateau near the village of Plasa, to the right of the road leading to the southern part of the Western Mani. The site, commanding a

The present form of the church is that of a domed three-aisled basilica without a narthex²⁶. The fact that the narthex did form part of the original edifice cannot, however, be disputed, because the north and south walls, which are composed of similar masonry, are carried beyond the west side, where the springing of a barrel vault is still preserved.

The three aises are covered with barrel vaults without windows. The pointed roof of the central vault is slightly higher than those of the side ones which are slanting. The dome, which has undergone alterations in the course of recent repair-work, rises above the vault of the nave. Judging from an old photograph⁷, one may describe the dome as a variation of the so-called Athenian one: that is to say, an octagon, whose sides are crowned by the vault of the nave. Originally there were four windows at the axial points and four conches at the diagonal axes; the four windows and three of the conches are now blocked. The dome, as we shall see, is not contemporary with the construction of the church. Another interesting architectural feature – also a later addition – is the belvedere crowning the entrance to the south aisle and consisting of two rectangular supports which form a single-lobe aperture²⁸.

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The impress of heaviness created by the exterior of the church is also evident in the interior. The three aisles are separated from each other by thick walls, each of which has three low narrow openings serving as passages of communication with the side aisles. The space is thus completely broken up into three independent units. The various transformations which the church has undergone add to the impression of heaviness. The two side openings of the screen of the nave have been blocked, and a thick wall has been raised above it in order, apparently, to support the dome. This wall has a square opening above the Holy Door which serves to relieve the weight of the

personification of the sea is generally encountered from the Palaeologue period onwards. At St. Nicholas the figure is distinguished from most similar depictions by its classical aspect, and its closest parallel is found in the early 14th century mosaic of the Baptism in the funerary chapel of the *Pammakaristos* (Fetihye Djami) in Constantinople.³

33-34, 62

e. *The Transfiguration*. Although the fresco has suffered considerable damage, a sufficient number of features survive to enable us to examine its iconography³⁹. The scene is dominated by the figure of Christ clad in white within a three-coloured circular glory. His right hand is extended in a dramatic gesture to the left; to the right, Moses holds the enormous table of the Law; the three apostles, dazed and terrified by the unprecedented experience, fall violently to the ground. The impression of drama is intensified by the diagonals formed by the sheafs of rays.

The most characteristic feature of the iconography of the scene, which also provides evidence of the process of elaboration it underwent during the Palaeologue period, consists of the dynamic attitudes of the three apostles. John, in the middle, falls face down on the ground; James, right, collapses on his back; Peter, left, - the figure is partially covered by the pilaster later added to the wall - is also depicted lying flat, face down. Similar attitudes on the part of the apostles are particularly characteristic of 14th century works, including the frescoes of the Peribleptos at Mistra and the miniature in the Theological Works of John Cantacuzenus (Paris, gr. 1242, fol. 92v)⁴⁰.

A further interesting feature, which permits us to assign the fresco to the cycle of works whose iconography is dependent on Constantinopolitan trends, is the round glory in which Christ is depicted, instead of the elliptical one common in most representations of the Transfiguration. The view has been advanced that the round glory suggests the dependence of iconography on a form of composition specially created for adaptation to the shape of the dome⁴¹. Since the Transfiguration was probably depicted in one of the five domes of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, it has been maintained that the origin of the iconographic type of the scene with the round glory derives from the capital⁴².

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f. *The Entry into Jerusalem*. In spite of the fresco's poor state of preservation, the scene is clearly rendered in the simple iconographic form which has much in common with Middle Byzantine trends⁴³. Consequently the group of Jews at the gates of Jerusalem is not an exceptionally large one, nor is there any undue emphasis, as in other Palaeologue examples, on the picturesque feature of the children in the foreground.

13, 66

g. *The Descent into Hell*. The source of the scene does not, as we know, derive from the four Gospels, but from an apocryphal text, the so-called Gospel of Nicodemus. The scene depicts Christ's Resurrection in terms of dogma. The resurrected Lord is represented at the moment when he enters the cave of Hades impetuously in order to release the righteous souls who had been awaiting their redemption for years. Adam and Eve, the ancestors of mankind, are the first to enjoy God's grace.

The iconography of the scene conforms to the established type of the period, but the sober use of iconographic features has much in common with earlier examples⁴⁴. The angels, the personification of Hades in chains and other minor themes, which generally enriched the Palaeologue ver-

sions of the scene, are consequently omitted; only the dramatic movements, particularly those of Adam, retain the spirit of the Palaeologue period.

12, 68

h. *The Ascension*. The place accorded to the scene in the church and the concentration of the iconographic features into three unities comply with long-standing tradition⁴⁵. The most interesting feature, which has deep-rooted origins going back to the Early Christian period, is the presence of the Virgin. Actually, in the text in which the Ascension of Christ is described - namely, the Acts of the Apostles (1, 9-11) - there is no reference to the Virgin's presence on the Mount of Olives at the time of the Ascension. Dogmatic reasons, however, demanded her inclusion in the scene, and her role in the Incarnation was thus emphasized⁴⁶.

The stately figure of the angel on the north wall stands out majestically. Its inclusion in the scene - originally there must have been two - corresponds with the text in the Acts of the Apostles, in which reference is made to two men clad in white garments, obviously angels, who explain the meaning of Christ's Ascension. In the representation at St. Nicholas, however, the angel wears red shoes, a dark blue chiton, a shorter green chiton and a rose-coloured mantle. Deviations in the traditional garb of the angels, such as the light-coloured chiton and himation, are encountered in other examples of the scene in which the angels are depicted wearing the sumptuous garments of Byzantine court officials⁴⁷. The dramatic gestures which characterize the figures of the apostles are moreover generally observed in Palaeologue depictions of the scene.

14, 65

i. *The Last Supper*. The scene is characterized by the inclusion of features deriving from an early tradition as well as those current mainly during the Palaeologue period⁴⁸. The depiction of Christ reclining on a couch at one end of the table is an archaic feature; in most Palaeologue works, especially Macedonian ones, Christ is represented seated in the middle, with half the apostles on the right, the other half on the left⁴⁹. The disposition of the apostles round a circular table, a reflection of the contemporary quest for the conquest of space, is certainly a progressive feature. The round bench, on which the apostles are seated - seldom seen in other depictions of the scene - is also a reflection of similar trends⁵⁰.

The Last Supper does not form part of the Dodecaorton cycle; as we know, it constitutes the introductory scene of a smaller iconographic cycle; namely, the Passion, which is often included in the iconographic programme of churches of the Palaeologue period. The Last Supper is nevertheless sometimes added to the Dodecaorton proper⁵¹. At St. Nicholas it can also be regarded as an integral part of the iconographic programme of the sanctuary, since it is depicted exactly opposite the Communion of the Apostles. The Last Supper and the Communion of the Apostles are intended to reveal the mystery of the Holy Eucharist in accordance with the latter's historical and symbolical interpretations; a similar juxtaposition of the two scenes may be observed as far back as the Early Christian period; in the 6th century Rossano Gospel, for instance⁵².

j. *The Washing of the Feet*. Due to the scene's monumental dimensions and the position accorded to it opposite the Baptism, the Washing of the Feet ranks as one of the most important scenes in the christological cycle.

In the fresco at St. Nicholas Christ is depicted drying St. Peter's feet, after having washed them;

11, 67